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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/24/2016

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SUBJECT: THAILAND F-16 UPDATE -- MID LIFE UPGRADES LOOK
PROMISING

REF: 05 BANGKOK 7529

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

11. (C) Summary: In separate meetings on January 24 with the Ambassador, Thai MOD Permanent Secretary GEN Sirichai Tanyasiri and RTAF CINC, ACM Chalit Pukbhasuk indicated that the Royal Thai Government was favorably considering purchasing mid-life upgrades (MLUs) on a number of the existing F-16 fighters in its fleet. While maintaining that no final decision had been made on whether to buy new planes in addition to the upgrades, neither Sirichai nor Chalit suggested that Thailand would purchase SU-30 fighters from Russia or Saab Gripen fighters from Sweden. End Summary.

MOD LOOKS FAVORABLY ON MLUS

12. (C) In his call on GEN Sirichai, the Ambassador pressed hard for an update on RTG plans to improve its fighter aircraft fleet. Sirichai suggested that the RTAF endorsed Lockheed Martin's proposal to perform MLUs on existing fighters. He indicated that RTAF Head, ACM Chalit, however, was wrestling with whether to spend his fighter budget entirely on upgrades or on a combination of upgrades and new fighters.

RTAF ALSO LIKES MLUs

13. (C) Later that day, the Ambassador met with Chalit and made an even stronger presentation -- emphasizing PM Thaksin's visit with the President and recent conversations with U.S. dignitaries in Bangkok in which Thaksin said he would not buy Russian planes (reftel). Chalit told the Ambassador that he was in the process of putting forward to the Prime Minister a final recommendation. Chalit acknowledged that, by performing MLUs on existing F-16's, the RTAF could extend the life of its aircraft until the Joint Strike Fighter became available for export. He also noted that the RTAF's existing fleet of 56 F-16s was adequate to meet Thailand's defense needs. He said that PM Thaksin had agreed in principle to provide him the budget to modify all of the F-16 A/B aircraft in its fleet. While admitting that the final decision would be Thaksin's, Chalit gave every indication that the RTAF would likely purchase MLUs.

14. (C) Chalit did not close the door on the RTAF purchasing any new aircraft -- claiming that Thaksin would make that decision. Nonetheless, he gave no indication that he favored

purchasing SU-30s or Gripens.

HOW MANY UPGRADES -- WHAT ABOUT THE PRESS STORIES?

15. (C) In a pull-aside with the DATT, ACM Sukumpol, the Chief of the Air Staff, indicated that the RTAF favored buying MLUs for 42 of the RTAF's F-16s. In recent discussions with JUSMAGTHAI and Lockheed Martin, the Thai have asked for information to provide MLUs on either 35 or 42 F-16's (the rest of Thailand's F-16s are newer models and would not/not require MLUs. Seven of the RTAF's planes were recently acquired from Singapore and have been configured as air defense fighters; the RTAF is uncertain whether they would require upgrades.)

16. (C) When asked about the validity of recent stories in the Thai press suggesting that Thaksin favored buying new SU-30s and that the RTAF was under political pressure to buy Russian planes, Chalit told the DATT that Thai reporters were simply speculating and not necessarily relying upon personal interviews as a basis for their stories. He asked us not to put too much stock into the recent series of news articles on the subject.

COMMENT

17. (C) A year ago, it appeared that the Thai fighter deal was a two way race between the Russians and Swedes. Thanks to a full court press orchestrated among Post, Lockheed Martin, and Washington, it is looking increasingly promising that Thailand will purchase MLUs -- a contract conceivably worth more than \$650 million. This money would consume most, if not all of the RTAF budget allocated for fighter upgrades. Our effort now is focused on pressing the Thai not to use

any left over funds to buy or barter for Russian planes. As such, we are adjusting our talking points on F-16 to reflect our satisfaction with any proposed MLU purchase, and to underscore the President's desire that Thailand not/not procure Russian aircraft. In support of this, we are repeatedly telling the Thai that a Russian acquisition would hurt Thailand's chances eventually to acquire the Joint Strike Fighter, affect interoperability, and possibly limit our ability to release sensitive technologies in the future. We suggest colleagues in Washington and Honolulu emphasize these same points in conversations with the Thai.

BOYCE